



The future management of Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve

Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve is managed by Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) on behalf of the owners, Ditchling Beacon and Commons, which is a registered charity. These organisations are considering the future management of the site for wildlife, historic features and for the many people who visit the site for quiet relaxation and recreation.

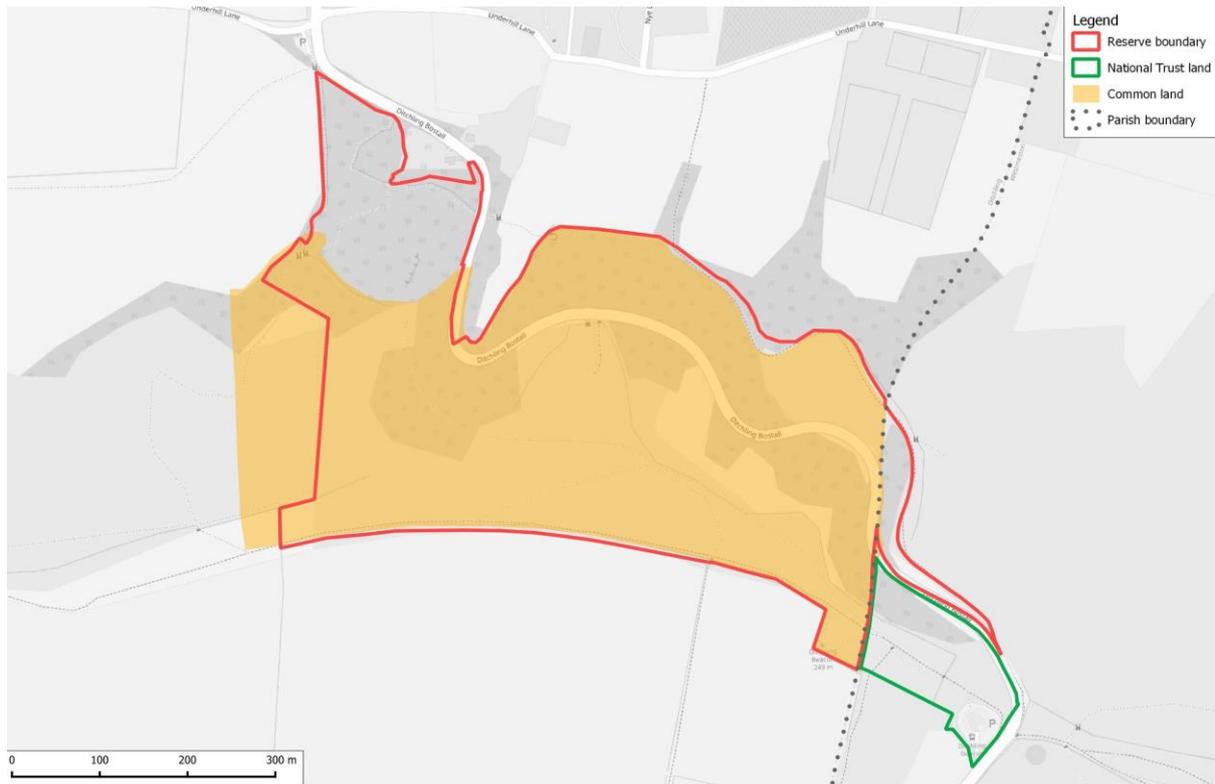
Further consultation is intended so please read this for your information and see details of the events at the end of this presentation.

An initial public consultation (following the guidance set out in [A Common Purpose](#)) on the future management was held between mid-October and January 2021 as part of the [Changing Chalk](#) project.

The consultation included information about the wildlife, archaeology and visitor use of this important and much loved site and the various options for its ongoing management. It also highlighted some of the management constraints on the site, such as the steep slopes and the presence of the Bostall Road.

Views on different management approaches were sought from all those interested in Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve through an online questionnaire, an on site drop in, three online webinars and direct correspondence. Together with relevant background information about the site, the responses were summarised in a report by independent consultants Footprint Ecology.

The report can be found [here](#).

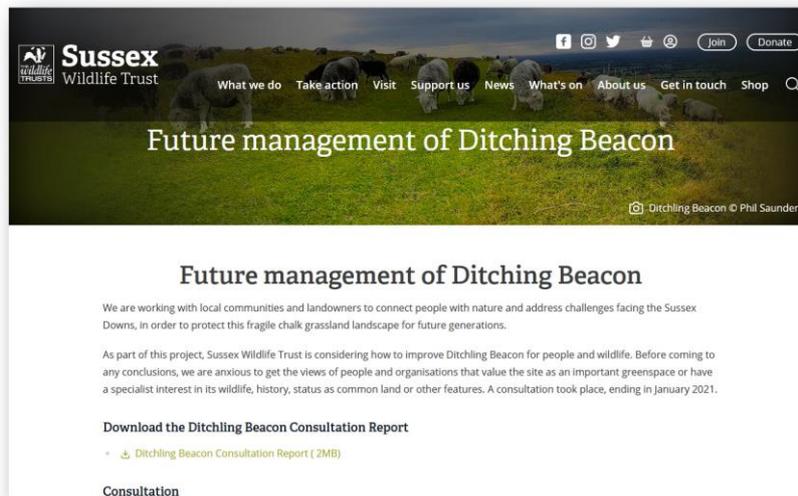


The Map above shows the boundary of the nature reserve and the areas that are registered common land.

Note that the Ditchling Beacon car park and immediately adjacent land are owned and managed by National Trust (NT) and are not specifically part of this consultation process.

The boundary of the common falls along the parish boundary - see Map.

Summary of responses to Phase 1 of the consultation



The questionnaire was completed by just over 200 people.

Almost a half of respondents visited the site to walk, with 13% visiting to dog walk and 10% visiting for the wildlife. The site is also used for horse riding, cycling, picnicking and other activities. Around 20% of respondents used the site at least weekly while 40% visited less than once a month. Over half of respondents travelled by car and around 25% arrived on foot.

The landscape and views were the most common reason that respondents were attracted to the site, while the availability of suitable paths, the peace and tranquilly, and the wildlife were also important.

While most respondents came from Ditchling, Hassocks, Lewes, and Brighton and Hove, some came from as far afield as Portsmouth in the west, Hastings in the east, and north into London.

A screenshot of the 'Ditchling Beacon Questionnaire' form. It features logos for Sussex Wildlife Trust, Heritage Fund, and Footprint Ecology. The text explains the survey's purpose and notes that data will be anonymous. Question Q1 asks for the most common activity at the site, with radio button options: Walking, Dog walking, Cycling/mountain biking, Horse riding, Running/jogging, Game reservation, Wildlife watching, Picnic/family outings, Meeting friends, Work, and Other (please detail). Question Q2 asks how often the respondent visits, with radio button options: Daily and More than once a week.

The most common concern raised about the site was dog fouling, followed by littering, disturbance and damage to wildlife and uncontrolled dogs. Other concerns included the state of paths, the risk of meeting either cyclists or livestock and anti-social behaviour.

Around 30% of people said that they didn't wish to see any changes to the site.

However, just under 20% mentioned better parking and more onsite information, while better footpaths, more seating and other suggestions were also made.



Respondents were asked specifically about management practices.

In general, the consultation suggested that many visitors were content with the current management but that there is diversity of opinion over scrub and tree clearance, mowing and grazing and around 25% of respondents were not sure.

Over 30% of respondents felt that the current balance of trees and scrub and open grassland is about right, with around 25% stating that there is either too much or too little respectively.

The remainder were unsure.

Around one half of respondents felt that the extent of both the grazed area and mown areas was about right while 25% felt that the grazed area was too small or were not sure, with a small percentage responding that it was too large. Around 25% were not sure about the mown area, with the remaining 25% split between those who felt was too large or too small.



The questionnaire responses included 80 free text comments that related directly to grazing. Many were directly supportive of grazing (50%), with just under 5% not in favour of grazing and the remainder making specific points, for example recommendations for particular approaches to grazing.

Notably there were requests for more information about when and where areas would be grazed.

In terms of the infrastructure required for fencing, around 40% of respondents preferred the use of boundary fencing with access points, while around 20% preferred temporary fencing and smaller proportions preferred fewer large or several small enclosures.

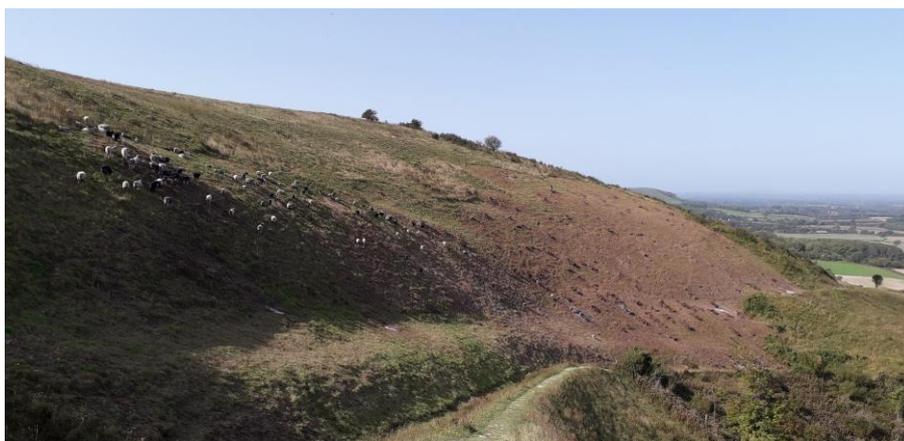
Some respondents remained unsure.



During the discussions following the webinars and during the onsite drop in, points raised included joined up management with the neighbours, the state of the bridleway, reviewing signage and interpretation and improving the car park at the foot of the beacon of Underhill Lane, promoting alternative means to visit the site other than by car, the management of archaeological features, concern about tree and scrub removal and Ash dieback, discussions around grazing, concerns over cycle events.

Written responses were quite specific and included a number of points about car parking, cycling, the need to maintain/restore the chalk grassland flora and fauna and access for horse riders.

Recommendations



Ditchling Beacon is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, is registered common land and contains scheduled ancient monuments.

A combination of habitat management approaches is needed to restore the wildlife of Ditchling Beacon SSSI to favourable condition, prevent any further loss of chalk grassland, and look after the historical and archaeological features of the site, while ensuring that the preferences of the visitors who know and love the site are taken into account.

*Following the first stage of the public consultation, the following **13 recommendations** have been made (more information and the reasoning behind these can be found in the Phase 1 consultation report).*

1. Continue **targeted scrub management** to prevent further encroachment in areas with species-rich grassland. Areas of less dense, species-rich scrub should be retained to provide structural diversity provide suitable nesting, sheltering, and foraging habitat for birds.
2. Carry out **ongoing selective tree-felling** to ensure the health and safety of visitors to the site. Pockets of woodland should be retained on the lower slopes and the structure and species composition managed in line with [Natural England's recommendations](#) for the management of Ash woodland impacted by die-back on SSSIs. Where possible and appropriate, scrub and trees should continue to screen the Bostall Road, both for aesthetic reasons and to shield the grassland from atmospheric pollution derived from road traffic, while ensuring that the iconic views from the site are retained.
3. **Mow** as necessary (and where practical) to reduce the dominance of bulky, ruderal species such as Hemp Agrimony and Willowherb that can dominate the sward following scrub clearance.
4. Continue with **existing livestock grazing** to maintain and improve the quality of existing areas of chalk grassland and to help restore those where coarse grasses and scrub have been developing on the site since the decline of grazing in the mid-20th Century. Sheep should be grazed on the chalk grassland in the winter, to avoid the loss of flowers and elimination of nectar sources in the summer, but can be grazed on restoration areas at other times. Small numbers of cattle should graze parts of

the slopes and the plateau in summer, avoiding grazing in winter due to a special community of liverworts only found on north facing downland that could be damaged by poaching in winter. The use of pesticides (wormers) should be avoided and bulls should not be used.

5. Carry out **further public consultation about extending grazing** in carefully targeted areas where species-rich grassland will otherwise be hard to maintain. Other areas of the site would remain ungrazed.

6. **Promote the use of public transport to access the site** and explore opportunities to improve public transport access.

7. Work with East Sussex County Council and the South Downs National Park to improve the **Underhill Lane informal car park** owned by East Sussex County Council to provide an alternative for visitors wishing to explore the northern section of the site.

8. Review the condition of the **Public Rights of Way** on the site with the East Sussex County Council and South Downs National Park Rights of Way officers and identify and implement solutions for improving surfaces in a sensitive and appropriate way where necessary.

9. Review **pre-visit interpretation, plus point of entry and within site interpretation** with the aim of increasing peoples' understanding and appreciation of the site, including its heritage and management (this should co-ordinate with interpretation/information provided by NT where possible).

10. Work with the National Trust and South Downs National Park Authority to explore a means of indicating the location of the damaged area of the **earthworks** in partnership with the neighbouring landowners (for example using low banks or posts to mark out the position of the earthworks).

11. Take measures to improve the awareness of the importance of **removing dog mess** from site (e.g. through working with local dog ambassadors). Consider the installation of more dog bins, taking into account the ongoing cost.

12. Consider the request for more **benches** in conjunction with the SDNP authority.

13. SWT staff should take steps to keep in touch with the local community, for example through the Ditchling Beacon Commons and other local community groups. In particular, regular information should be provided to the local community about the presence or otherwise of grazing livestock so that visitors are fully aware of where they may encounter livestock at any particular time.



Phase 2 of the consultation

Why we are consulting further

SWT is keen to consult further about the potential extension of grazing in particular so that the views and suggestions of site users and stakeholders can be taken into account before a final decision is made (as recommended by A Common Purpose).

Permission for any new fencing would be required from the Planning Inspectorate.

In addition, any work undertaken on Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve needs to take into account the wider aspirations for the chalk downland landscape. There is increasing emphasis on landscape scale conservation, particularly following on from the [Lawton report](#) in 2010, which recommended that wildlife sites should be bigger, better and more joined up.

In line with new statutory requirement to develop [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#), a more coherent approach to the management of the chalk landscape of which Ditchling Beacon forms a part is likely to be developed.

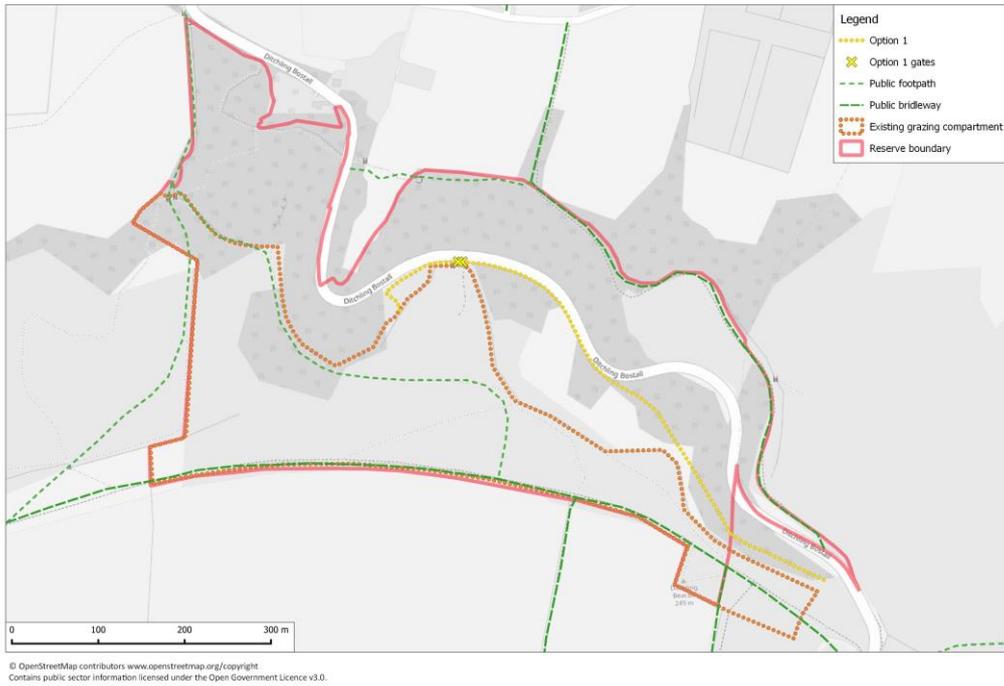
Any infrastructural changes at Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve should therefore take account of any evolving longer-term aspirations, such as more extensive, joined up management across the landscape.

What are the proposals?

The following 4 preferred options are being put forward by Sussex Wildlife Trust.

A series of maps and a flyby video are used to illustrate these.

1. The existing fence line close to the edge of the plateau should be **moved down the slope** to make it less conspicuous and to allow important areas of species rich grassland on the steep slopes to be grazed (**see Map below and flyby video**)



2. A grazing enclosure should be created **north of the Bostall Road** to allow an area of species-rich grassland within the woodland to be grazed (**see Map below and flyby video**). This area will continue to deteriorate unless grazed, and repeated cutting is not sustainable in the long term. **Two options have been identified**. The first involves fencing on the slope above the bridleway (see Figure 1). The second would bring the fence line down to the existing boundary fence with the installation of two appropriate gates to allow access along the bridleway.

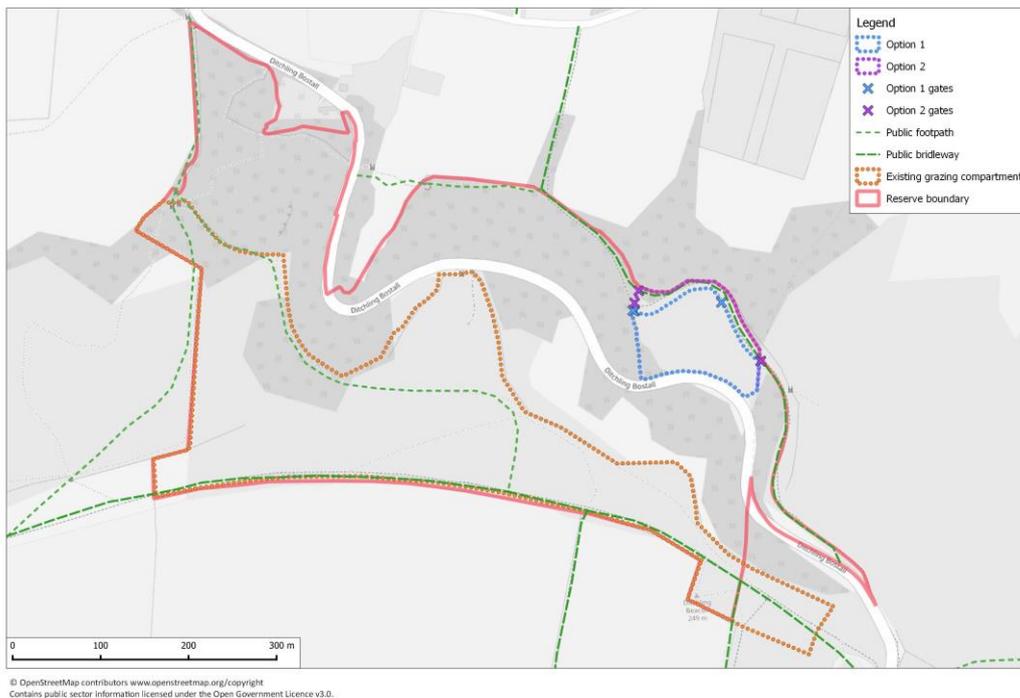




Figure 1: The proposed option 1 fenceline above the bridleway at Ditchling Beacon Nature Reserve (north of the Bostall Road).

3. Use “No Fence” GPS controlled virtual fencing to focus sheep grazing within particular areas of rank grassland on the steeper slopes of the southern grazing compartment for short periods throughout the year. This does not require consent from the Planning Inspectorate but is included here for completeness.

4. Gates should conform to the appropriate standards and any **unnecessary fencing should be removed**. Some existing fencing may need replacing. Piped or pumped water will also need to be installed, as there is currently no water supply.

Click the link below for a “flyby” map showing topography

<https://sway.office.com/cCHwj7nhjniAQ5ut#content=6wtiKEEIGkwVMS>

Rationale



The chalk grassland of the South Downs was created and maintained over centuries by livestock grazing. Without grazing, coarse grasses and then scrub become dominant, shading out more sensitive plants and changing the habitat so that it is no longer suitable for characteristic butterflies and other invertebrates. Livestock also provide microhabitats for plants and invertebrates through

creating patches of bare ground and swards of different heights. From an ecological perspective, the site should be grazed to maintain and improve the quality of existing areas of chalk grassland and to help restore those where coarse grasses and scrub have been developing on the site since the decline of grazing from about 1940 onwards.

Currently, the plateau and part of the steep slope are grazed by sheep in winter and cattle in summer. However, there are areas of species-rich chalk grassland that are currently un-grazed that will decline further in quality if left unmanaged. These areas need to be grazed if the site is to reach “favourable condition” (defined by Natural England, the government’s adviser on nature conservation). The steep slopes make mechanical cutting and collection extremely difficult, and in any case, this is a less satisfactory approach as it creates a less diverse sward and results in a sudden, drastic loss of nectar sources and structure for invertebrates.

The issues surrounding grazing are complex at Ditchling Beacon – there are very steep slopes, the road must be fenced out, and the steep areas of woodland with Ash dieback are problematic for livestock. The proposed fence lines have been suggested after careful consideration and investigation on the ground taking into account the location of priority areas for chalk grassland restoration and the importance of access for visitors combined with the practicalities of erecting fencing and the visibility of the fence from key vantage points. Attempts to avoid the need for fencing by installing cattle grids on the Bostall Road failed some years ago. The Bostall road therefore needs to be fenced out of the grazing area. Although creating a single boundary fence around the southern section of the site would be the preferred option, this is unfeasible because of the challenge of clearing a fence line through areas where diseased trees have been felled and the unsuitability of some very steep, wooded areas for grazing livestock on health and safety grounds.

In the southern section, the proposed extension to the existing grazing unit will take in some important areas of chalk grassland on the steep slope. The proposed new fenceline would tie in with the new National Trust fence near the car park. It would then go through the wooded area (where it will be less visible than the existing fence) before dropping down and running just above the road before meeting up with the existing fence near the western boundary. This fence will enlarge the existing grazing unit by approximately 2.7 hectares.

North of the Bostall road, a single fence is proposed to enclose the remaining area (about 1 hectare) of relatively species-rich chalk grassland. Two options have been put forward. In the first, the fence line would be set back by some metres from the bridleway (see Figure 1), allowing plenty of room and avoiding the need for gates on the bridleway. In the second option, the fence would run down to the current boundary fence, so there is not an additional fence running parallel to the bridleway; it would require two gates at the points where the fence crosses the bridleway. In both options, the eastern and western fences would be largely concealed in the existing woodland/scrub. A field gate into the enclosure would also be required.

There are restoration areas within the existing grazing unit which require more focused grazing to allow them to revert to species rich chalk grassland. To avoid the need for fencing compartments within the grazing unit, SWT is exploring the use of [No Fence](#) virtual fencing to allow these ranker areas to be periodically grazed more intensively by a small number of sheep. Following training, the sheep would wear a collar with a GPS unit and receive an audio cue when they approach the virtual fence line. This is directional, prompting to them to move away from the fenceline to avoid a mild electric pulse received if they cross the line. Other wild animals or domestic animals such as dogs and horses, people with heart pacemakers, hearing aids etc. are unaffected. Virtual fencing is now an established grazing tool and is used on numerous farms and conservation sites around the

country. However, it is not suitable for use alongside roads and other dangerous boundaries where physical barriers are still needed.

Consultation events



Sussex Wildlife Trust is consulting on the proposals to alter the fence line of the existing grazing unit and to add a second grazing unit in the north of the site and are very keen to obtain the views of all interested parties via the events below.

Comments can also be sent to Fenella Lewin, Footprint Ecology, Forest Office, Cold Harbour, Wareham, BH20 7PA or e-mailed to Fenella at commons@footprint-ecology.co.uk.

The consultation runs from the **18th of July to the 30th of September 202:**

28th July 9am-2pm: On site drop-in at Ditchling Beacon Car Park with short guided walks (at 10:30am and 1pm) to discuss the proposals view the proposed fenceline, and receive comments. Staff from SWT and the South Downs National Park will be present.

31st August 12pm – 8pm: Drop in at Ditchling Village Hall to discuss the proposals and receive comments. Staff from SWT and Footprint Ecology will be present.

6th September, 3pm-4pm: Online webinar with SWT and Footprint Ecology staff to explain the proposals and receive comments. Please e-mail commons@footprint-ecology.co.uk or call 01929 552444 to book on.

8th September, 7pm-8pm: Online webinar with SWT and Footprint Ecology staff to explain the proposals and receive comments. Please e-mail commons@footprint-ecology.co.uk or call 01929 552444 to book on.
